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U.S. Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., prepares to 'light up' Wise County's fiber-optic 'backbone' Monday as Sunset Digital Vice President Ryan Elswick, state Sen. Phillip Puckett, D-Lebanon, and Delegate Terry Kilgore (left to right) look on at the Lonesome Pine Regional Business & Technology Park.

Wise County 'lights up' fiber-optic backbone

■ **Boucher** said the region's telecommunications infrastructure combined with low energy and land costs will help attract high-tech jobs.

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WISE — Investing tobacco settlement dollars into technology infrastructure is already showing returns in Southwest Virginia, and the region's economic future received yet another boost with completion of a fiber-optic "backbone" in Wise County, officials at the Lonesome Pine Regional Business & Technology Park said Monday.

U.S. Rep. Rick Boucher, D-Va., said deployment of fiber-optic networks using a combination of federal and state tobacco settlement funds is already showing returns in the form of 1,220 jobs across the seven coal-producing counties, with more than \$50 million in new private investment and \$37 million in annual payrolls. Expansions by technology giants CGI and Northrop Grumman in Russell County account for the bulk of the investments and about 750 of those jobs, which average \$50,000 each on the annual payroll scale.

A "lighting up" ceremony took place at the county's technology shell building, which now

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houses a component of Verizon and space for new tenants. Boucher said that's what the decade-long effort to build a fiber-optic infrastructure from Lee County to Tazewell County is all about, attracting technology business and building a new economic base for the region.

No rural area in America can boast a telecommunications infrastructure as can Southwest Virginia, Boucher said. The U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration provided \$4.6 million to help install the still-growing 206-mile network across the seven counties, and the Virginia Tobacco Commission has invested \$5.2 million to date.

When construction is completed in late autumn, the project will interconnect two existing fiber-optic "backbones" serving Lee and Wise counties, and Russell and Tazewell counties, that will bring affordable broadband service to those areas.

"There is literally no place in rural America that can (boast) a fiber-optic network that we have here," Boucher said.

Now that a telecommunications infrastructure is in place, Boucher said low energy costs, low land costs and taxes, as well as a high quality of life, will prove attractive to telecommunications businesses like server farms and data centers.

"This area becomes, I think, the choice for high-tech jobs," he said.

State Sen. William Wampler Jr., R-Bristol, did not attend Monday's ceremonial "lighting up" of the network but received most of the credit for crafting state legislation to ensure that Virginia's tobacco settlement dollars would be reinvested into tobacco-growing regions, namely Southside and Southwest Virginia.

Delegate Terry Kilgore, vice chairman of the Tobacco Commission, and state Sen. Phillip Puckett, D-Lebanon, serve on the commission together and have been a part of a team to make the sorts of investments to localities

that pay off in the long run with vital elements like a fiber-optic network, Boucher said.

Kilgore said the commission's investments "pay dividends to revitalize the economics of Southwest and Southside Virginia," and the backbone dedicated Monday will also serve the continued growth of the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

Puckett said private investors didn't want any part of what was seen as an ambitious scheme several years ago, and Wampler's crafting of the tobacco settlement legislation "was crucial because it helps us to help ourselves." The bipartisan mantra of the Southwest Virginia delegation to Richmond is a pretty strong team, he said.

"I will say, and Terry will echo, we're not through yet," Puckett said. "We've got some things we'd like to do, and we've got some (tobacco settlement) dollars to invest."

Wise County Board of Supervisors Chairman Ronnie Shortt said the new fiber-optic segment "speaks volumes about Wise County because we are committed to compete in the 21st century world with cutting-edge technology."

Shortt said the fiber-optic network "is just a tool. How we use it will write the history of Wise County in the future ... but it truly gives Wise County an opportunity to move forward in the 21st century."

Lenowisco Executive Director Ron Flanary, who earlier this year announced his plans to retire, received special praise during Monday's ceremonies.

Flanary has literally been neck deep in the fiber-optic projects across both planning districts. Never afraid to get his hands or boots muddy, he has actually been in ditches where the lines have been buried.

Boucher said Flanary's leadership "has been spectacular" and said Flanary was one of the "prime moving forces" to achieve a growing fiber-optic network.

"We would not be here today," said Boucher, "if not for Ron."